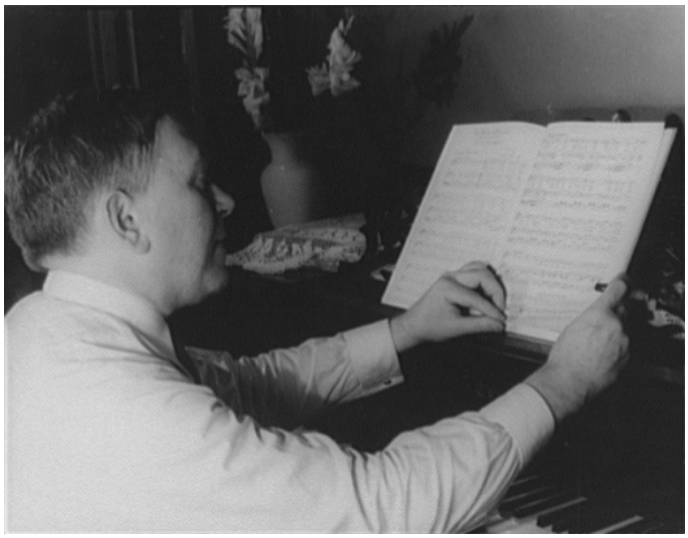

H. L. Mencken, photographed by Carl Van Vechten in 1932.

form of writing during the time period, to satirize some examples of "common sense" that were often sold as good advice to young men.

Mencken begins the satire by pointing out a fundamental contradiction: many people are advised to focus on cultivating virtue before cultivating wealth. Yet, in his experience, one's wealth is actually more valuable in social situations than one's character; or, more precisely, one's wealth *becomes* one's character. To Mencken, this reveals something quite alarming about how America approaches social class. On the one hand, young people are brought up to value virtuous behavior. But on the other hand, actual experience reveals that "virtuous behavior" is a somewhat fluid concept, given how wealthy people are actually treated. Even if someone is polite to a wealthy person only because they think it will be to their advantage, this still reinforces Mencken's point about Jazz Age morality: ethical concerns usually "crook the knee" to financial considerations.

The second and third sections continue this satirical examination of "common sense" ideas. In "The Venerable Examined," Mencken asks: does age actually equal wisdom? He's not so sure. In fact, he feels that age actually has compromised his decision-making. And if this is the case for him, it might also be the case for the justices of the United States Supreme Court, since, in 1922, Mencken was forty-two, and the youngest Supreme Court Justice, George Sutherland, was fifty-nine.[157] Mencken's wry assessment of his own mental abilities is not meant to suggest that age automatically means a decline in mental abilities. Instead, it's an indirect way of criticizing the Supreme Court (one of Mencken's frequent targets)[158] while also poking holes in the supposed "obviousness" of the claim that age brings wisdom.

In the third essay, Mencken challenges a supposedly inarguable moral principle: that all people have duties that they must follow. Duty seems like an obvious moral good. In typical Mencken fashion, however, anything that's "obvious" is viewed suspiciously. Duty, in Mencken's argument, is actually just another form of conformity: you do your duty because it's the thing you're *supposed* to do. For Mencken, this isn't necessarily a good thing. If "duty" is really just another word for "following the status quo," then the concept is actually harming society rather than informing it: "Human progress is furthered, not by conformity, but by aberration." To truly change the world, we must sometimes *not* do our duty, especially if our duty involves things like devoutly obeying those in power. These essays are illustrative of Mencken's intellectual style, and they also reflect how some writers of the time period felt emboldened to question not only social norms, but also core philosophical principles like duty, virtue, and wisdom.

"ROPE" BY KATHERINE ANNE PORTER

Katherine Anne Porter: Biography and Background

Katherine Anne Porter (1890–1980) was one of the most influential modernist writers of the twentieth century, as well as one of the most celebrated. Despite infrequent and limited production—she only published twenty-seven stories, one novel, a brief memoir, and a series of essays and critical pieces—she had ascended to the highest echelons of literary fame by the end of her life. Her *Collected Stories* (1965) won both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award for fiction, making it one of only seven works of fiction to win both distinguished awards as well as one of only two career-spanning collections of stories to win the Pulitzer Prize and one of only three to win the National Book Award. She also received a Guggenheim Fellowship and multiple writing awards throughout her career, and her writings have been collected as part of the esteemed *Library of America* collection.

World War II. However, the term technically refers to any widespread act of violence.

89 Ibid., 164

90 Hopalong Cassidy was a fictional cowboy created by Clarence E. Mulford who appeared in serialized stories and novels. Many young people of the early twentieth century would have read his stories in the same way that young people would eventually read comic books or watch Saturday morning cartoons.

91 *The Great Gatsby*, 175.

92 Ibid., 180. This line is frequently cited as one of the most famous and recognizable final lines in literature.

93 Ibid., 6.

94 See Phelan, *Living to Tell About It*.

95 Stallman, 55.

96 *The Great Gatsby*, 59.

97 Ibid., 2.

98 Ibid., 154, 179.

99 Ibid., 20.

100 Ibid., 99.

101 Ibid., 98–99.

102 Ibid., 98.

103 Ibid., 110.

104 Ibid., 110–111.

105 Ibid., 110, emphasis added.

106 Person, 250.

107 *The Great Gatsby*, 150, 149, 120.

108 Ibid., 149.

109 Ibid., 151.

110 Ibid., 108.

111 Ibid., 7, 11.

112 Slater, 53.

113 *The Great Gatsby*, 179.

114 Ibid., 58.

115 Ibid., 177.

116 Ibid., 25.

117 Ibid., 137.

118 Ibid., 159.

119 Ibid., 69–70.

120 Slater, 56.

121 Ibid., 1.

122 Ibid., 62–63.

123 Ibid., 107.

124 Donaldson, 69.

125 *The Great Gatsby*, 3.

126 Ibid., 2.

127 Ibid., 180.

128 Ibid., 179, 143.

129 Le Fustec, 82.

130 *The Great Gatsby*, 160.

131 Zeitz 66–68. Zeitz uses the example of Margaret Sanger to help illustrate this point. Sanger began her activist career as a dedicated Marxist, focused almost exclusively on structural and institutional forces. However, over time her activism became more targeted, in both its language and its aims, toward the individual.

132 *The Great Gatsby*, 93.

133 Ibid., 96.

134 Ibid., 180.

135 Corrigan, 24.

136 *The Great Gatsby*, 180.

137 Maureen Corrigan's *So We Read On* describes multiple events where fans of the novel gather to discuss the work, including several speaking engagements that Corrigan herself organizes in preparation for the book.

138 Rankings taken from the following page: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/search?search=the%20great%20gatsby.

139 Trilling, 252.

140 "How to Live on $36,000 a Year" in *F. Scott Fitzgerald: The Great Gatsby, All the Sad Young Men, and Other Writings 1920–1926*, 658.

141 Ibid., 658–659.

142 Discussed in greater detail in the USAD Literature Resource Guide section on *The Great Gatsby*.

143 "Echoes of the Jazz Age," 3.

144 Ibid., 5.

145 Ibid., 5.

146 Ibid., 8.

147 Crane was deeply inspired by Elizabethan writers and by British Romantic poets, especially William Blake, and further considered himself to be working within the tradition laid down by nineteenth-century American writers, especially Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson, and Walt Whitman.

148 Spears.

149 Lewis, 79.

150 "76: To Gorham Munson" in *Letters of Hart Crane: 1916–1932*.

151 "77: To Gorham Munson" in Ibid.

152 "124: To Gorham Munson" in Ibid.

153 Caudill.

154 Rodgers, 3.

155 See Gentzkow et al., who show that the 1920s inaugurated an era of a truly "informative press" since the "share of political newspapers that claimed to be independent rose from eleven percent in 1870 to sixty-two percent in 1920," 2.

156 Mencken quoted in Ibid., 7.

157 The oldest justice was Oliver Wendell Holmes, who was eighty-one. Mencken was even younger than the youngest justice, George Sutherland, who was fifty-nine.

158 Mencken, unsurprisingly, was particularly galled by the findings of several cases involving free speech, including *Abrams vs. United States* (1919) and *Gitlow v New York* (1925). In both cases, the Court confirmed the validity of the government's right to circumstantially restrict free speech.

159 Stout, 6.

160 Ibid., 7.

161 "Edna St. Vincent Millay," Poetry Foundation, accessed 25 November 2024, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/edna-st-vincent-millay.

162 Ibid.

163 Freedman, xvi.

164 Ibid., xv.

165 Sanders, 11. Brown explicitly distanced himself from the Harlem Renaissance because of its geographic bias and its reliance on white benefactors. However, the Harlem Renaissance is the most popular and most enduring legacy of the New Negro Movement.

166 Brown, 180. Brown identifies and analyzes the following sereotypical stock characters used by many white writers and even by some Black writers: "The Contented Slave"; "The Wretched Freeman"; "The Comic Negro"; "The Brute Negro"; "The Tragic Mulatto"; "The Local Color Negro"; and "The Exotic Primitive."

167 Ibid., 180, 198.

168 Ibid., 17.

169 *Henry IV Part 1* 5.2.86–88.

170 "Georgia Douglas Johnson recommendation, November 16, 1927." W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

171 "Claudia Tate: On Georgia Douglas Johnson's Poetry," Modern American Poetry Site, accessed 25 November 2024, https://modernamericanpoetry.org/claudia-tate-georgia-douglas-johnsons-poetry.

172 Qtd. in Roses, 203.

173 Ibid.

174 Coates. See also his memoir *Between the World and Me*.

175 "Lynchings by Year and Race," University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Law, Accessed 25 November 2024, http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/shipp/lynchingyear.html.

176 Hughes' travels took him across the world in pursuit of new literary, political, and cultural connections. He visited Mexico, Spain, the Soviet Union, West Africa (including transformative visits to Liberia), France, Italy, Haiti, Cuba, China, and Japan.

177 Collected in *The Weary Blues* (1926).

178 Kaisary, 127.

179 Hughes was deeply involved with many writers of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, including LeRoi Jones (who eventually changed his name to Amiri Baraka) and Gwendolyn Brooks.

180 Wall, iii.